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SUBJECT: LEBANON: ADVANCING FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY REPORT

REF: SECSTATE 3738

Introduction  
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1. (SBU) Lebanon's democratic traditions go back at least to its initial elections in 1854, under Ottoman Empire rule. The key landmarks in Lebanon's democratic history are the 1924 Constitution, the National Pact of 1940, and the 1989 Ta'if Accord. Throughout Lebanon's history democratic initiatives have been challenged and the challenges continue in this present day. Lebanon has had no president since the term of the former president ended in November 2007. The Speaker of the parliament has canceled parliamentary sessions intended to elect a president sixteen times in recent months. The political impasse in Lebanon is deepening, despite international efforts to mediate a solution. What is at stake in this election are two competing visions: one envisioning a free, independent, and sovereign country; the other a Lebanon under the de facto hegemony of Syria. The pro-government March 14 majority, which the USG supports, feels under severe threat, with its Members of Parliament taking extraordinary security precautions after the assassinations of several of their colleagues.

2. (SBU) Beyond the current presidential vacuum, Lebanon faces a number of long-term challenges which affect its ability to move forward on various democratic issues. Among these are the still strong remains of a post-feudal social and political structure, an economy suffering the effects of the 2006 war between Hizballah and Israel, lack of political stability, weak governmental institutions, the political and military strength of Hizballah, the residual influence of the former Syrian occupiers, and the absence of a national consensus on what type of democracy Lebanon should embrace. Optimism was high in spring 2005 when the Syrians withdrew from Lebanon. Unfortunately, the series of political assassinations since then, the Hizballah-Israeli war and the current boycott of the government by pro-Syrian forces has shaken the confidence of many citizens.

3. (SBU) Thus, Lebanon has a clear need for stronger, better functioning democratic institutions. In addition, though, there are a number of positive factors which make Lebanon an ideal location for USG

democracy-building activity. Lebanese society is highly educated with a vibrant press. Although many young people have emigrated to build secure futures, they would prefer to stay in Lebanon if conditions became more favorable. Finally, we have seen civil society groups, supported by international donors, begin to take hold over the last few years. Certainly, a great deal of work remains, but the foundations for improved democratic functions are being laid.

#### Mission Priorities to Promote Democracy

14. (SBU) The primary aim of our Mission's democratization programs is to promote Lebanon's sovereignty and stability. Three key focus areas for our work include:

- a new electoral law;
- competent, effective, and transparent government institutions; and
- an independent judiciary.

#### Specific USG Programs in Lebanon in Support of Democracy Priority Areas

##### 15. (SBU) ELECTORAL REFORM

Our overall goal here is to help Lebanon hold free and fair parliamentary elections which reflect the independent will of the people. The Mission has formed an Electoral

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##### Reform

Working Group which meets brings together USG representatives with local NGOs and implementing partners. The Embassy also coordinates with international donors as we help build Lebanese capacity to hold free and fair elections in accordance with international electoral standards. The current political stalemate which began with the opposition's November 2006 withdrawal from the Cabinet and the action by the parliament Speaker, a leader of the political opposition, to keep the Parliament from meeting has greatly hampered efforts to reform the current electoral law. Our support to local NGOs has been credited with "keeping the issue alive." In 2008-2009, the Mission will focus on the spring 2009 parliamentary election. A new electoral law accepted by all parties will help grant legitimacy to this election and enhance stability in the country.

##### 16. (SBU) STRENGTHENING GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

All USG funds are coordinated by the Mission to strengthen Lebanese sovereignty by bolstering the democratic governing institutions and improving transparency and accountability. More effective institutions will repel Syrian influence and decrease Hizballah's authority and influence. Embassy Beirut also plans to improve Lebanese citizens' ability to participate in decision-making processes. While current political events have hampered our ability to work with certain national institutions, the Mission has placed a renewed focus on finding opportunities to strengthen municipal governments throughout Lebanon. The Lebanese constitution mandates that certain government institutions be led by persons from specific groups. For example, the president should be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim and the speaker of the Parliament a Shia Muslim.

However, demographic changes have occurred over time and the strict focus on confessional make-up has led to many of the current problems plaguing Lebanese government institutions.

USG-funded initiatives offer support to civil society organizations that promote enhancing cross-confessional proposals throughout Lebanese society and within government institutions. In the coming two years, we will support the work of

cross-confessional civil society groups, including non-extremist Shia and Sunni groups throughout Lebanon.

Embassy

Beirut will also work to improve the professionalism of various

government employees and support the idea that employees should be hired based on merit, not confessional ties or personal connections. A new USD 60 million program launched in 2007 also provides training and support to the Internal Security Forces (Lebanon's national police force) to enhance professionalism in that institution.

#### 17. (SBU) INDEPENDENT JUDICIARY

After decades of Syrian control, the Lebanese judiciary has not improved over the last two years and remains in disrepute. With USG technical support, laws are drafted according to international standards and more judicial officials have been trained by professionals from the U.S. and other donor countries. Problems remain, however; for example, money and influence still derail the Lebanese judicial process; judicial decisions are not transparent; and, the appeals system fails to address the public's needs. Lebanese citizens lack faith in their own court system. USG-funded initiatives will focus on improving these conditions. This likely is a long-term project which will need continued financial support from the USG.

#### 18. (SBU) OTHER INITIATIVES

The Mission is also involved in supervising USG grants which seek to improve the plight of trafficking victims and to monitor labor practices, particularly to stop any forms of child labor. The Mission also coordinates various programs aimed at improving the economic and political status of women. Finally, the Mission has launched a USD 5 million program which seeks to improve anti-corruption practices, promote

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freedom of the press and strengthen NGOs.  
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